

Cherilyn Widell

Parks Without Boundaries

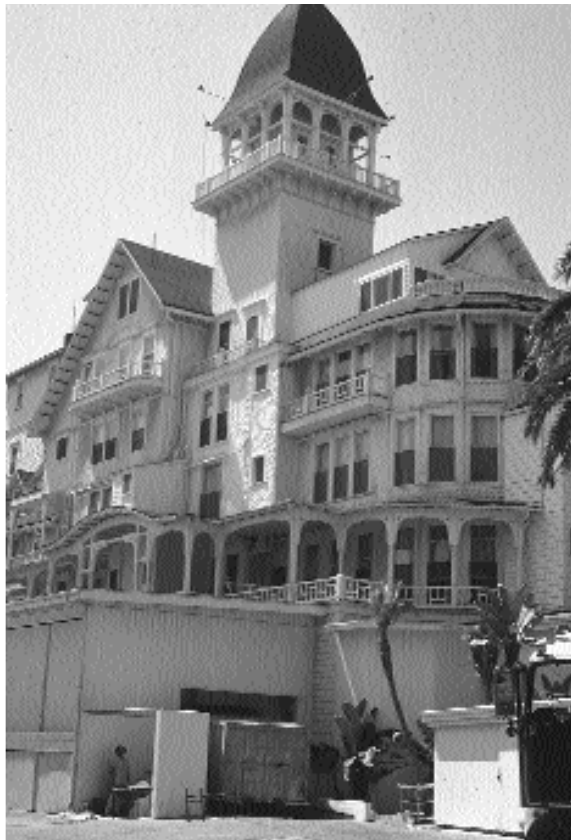
The NHL Program

Bas relief dating from 1857 on one of the early buildings remaining in Mare Island NHL, Vallejo, California. Photo by Susan Escherich.

On a daily basis, State Historic Preservation Officers (SHPOs) must deal with a multitude of historic preservation designations that range from local landmarks to National Historic Landmarks (NHLs). Most of us who work in the historic preservation field have become adept at sorting out these various designations—along with their corresponding benefits and protections. But, to most citizens, the phrase “landmark status” is still far from clear. Few of the lay public understand the range of designations, economic incentives, and technical information available to them. Further uncertainty is created by the variety of government agencies (federal, state, and local) that provides these designations. This lack of understanding prevents our national historic preservation program from being as effective as it might be.

Lay people usually just want the answers to such basic questions as “how do I get a property

Hotel del Coronado, San Diego, California. Photo by Robert C. Van Etten.



on the National...” or “what does landmark designation prevent me from doing?” At the local level, the confusion about the NHL designation leads many to question its continued relevance. I could not disagree more.

The NHL program is a critical designation program in the process of identifying and interpreting our collective national heritage. True to our democracy, the United States’ national historic preservation program—unlike programs in other countries—is inclusive rather than exclusive. Our national egalitarian character values the humble log cabin as much as the elegant mansion, the steel mill as much as the skyscraper, and everyday places as much as our national shrines. It is this philosophy that drives the National Register of Historic Places—still the most democratic, grassroots driven historic preservation designation program in the world.

Despite the emphasis on local significance, there is a need for Americans to understand that in many instances, national history is embodied in these community places. The NHL program helps us to establish these national themes, personages, and accomplishments. For example, Nassau Hall is the central building on the Princeton University campus and is prominent within the contexts of both the Borough of Princeton and Princeton University. It is also a NHL because it served as the nation’s capitol for several weeks.

In another example, in western Maryland, where many stone bridges are located and revered, the Casselman Bridge is a favorite local landmark. At the same time, it is also a NHL because it carried traffic on the National Road that led to this country’s western expansion. The NHL program finds those special places in our own backyards that connect our individual communities to the nation’s history.

The NHL program evolved from some of the earliest efforts in the country to preserve and protect historic places. The National Park Service (NPS), as well as state park systems, such as those in California, used historical themes as a means of identifying properties that should be acquired for historical parks. In the 1920s, acquisition was perceived as the only way to save historic places. Then, as now, funds were limited and



Marin County Civic Center, NHL designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. San Rafael, California. Photo by Susan Escherich.

there were more nationally-significant historic sites that could be acquired by state or federal park systems. It is this initial list of sites that became the basis of the NHL program.

The NHL program was described in the 1959 edition of the National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings as "reminding us of famous persons and events that have made our American way of life possible. In a time of deep crisis, the survival of our Nation may depend on our knowledge and appreciation of the hardships, sacrifices, and ideals of our forefathers." The NHL program significantly predated and foreshadowed the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act that established the National Register of Historic Places.

In 1997, most citizens know that all significant historic properties cannot possibly be contained within national or state parks. The now popular term, "parks without boundaries" emphasizes the importance of connecting historic properties in parks and the stewardship ethic they represent within the context of the community in which they are located. The NHL program pro-

vides that key link between the story of a community and the story of the nation.

At times in the past, the NPS designated a place as a NHL that members of the surrounding community never realized had any historic significance. Today, we are working together to build the connections and understanding between the telling of a community's history and its relationship with national history. Not only will this result in a citizenry that is better informed about our national heritage, but it will also help to better convey our national history to foreign visitors interested in getting beyond our national parks. This will bring the benefits and pride of heritage tourism to our cities, towns, and rural areas.

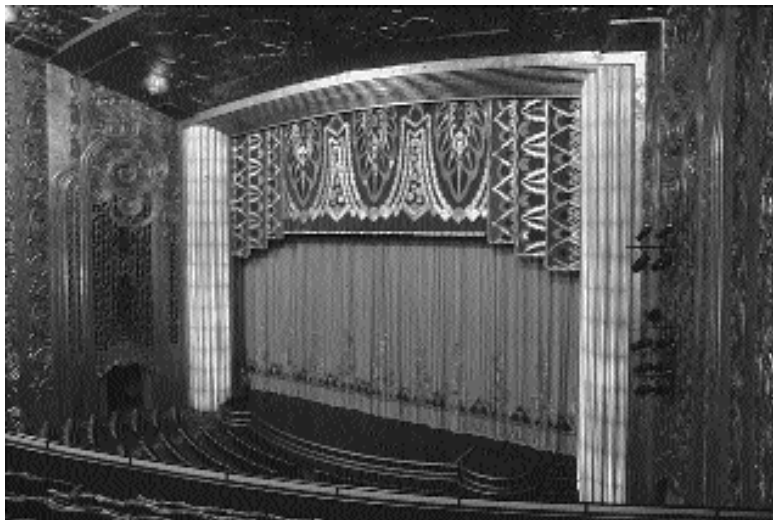
SHPOs must work with communities and the NPS to strengthen this link because it will result in a stronger national historic preservation program at every level. Through the NHL technical assistance efforts and by using the property as an illustration about how to care for related properties in an area, the NPS could influence the stewardship of cultural properties throughout an entire region, not just the owner of the NHL.

In times of disaster, the NHL program provides the SHPO with an immediate list of properties that should get the first and highest priority for response and protection. The NHL program also provides the United States with a list of nationally-significant properties that can qualify for international designations, such as the World Heritage List. The list can be used on a comparative basis with other cultural property listings worldwide. Further, the NHL program can assist with the understanding of historical themes that leave their imprint on communities across the nation.

Most importantly, the NHL program could and should be the pre-eminent showplace of private stewardship of designated landmark properties of every level of significance. Working hand-in-hand with the private owners of NHLs, the NPS and SHPOs could provide the model for how all levels of government and the private sector can pro-actively assist property owners in taking advantage of available incentives and technical information to preserve and protect landmarks.

The NHL program moves cultural resource stewardship beyond the boundaries of our national parks and brings an understanding of our national heritage into our communities. That connection to our national history, in turn, strengthens our understanding of our local, state, and regional history and makes us all better informed citizens.

Cherilyn Widell is the State Historic Preservation Officer for California.



Proscenium of Paramount Theater NHL, Oakland, California. Courtesy NPS.